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Putting the accent on the way we speak can be a stressful matter

Rowan Mantell

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Have you ever been suspected of talking squat, simply because you speak with an accent as beautiful as our big skies and saltmarshes, beaches and broads; and as historic as Norfolk's henges or unrivalled collection of medieval churches?

An expert in linguistics this week said that people with regional accents can feel obliged to change the way they talk – and are left feeling stressed and fraudulent.

Dr Alex Baratta of Manchester University believes people with regional accents should be protected

“If you live in Norfolk and are pleased about that, then you should expect your children to sound like they grew up in Norfolk and be pleased about that too

Prof Peter Trudgill

from discrimination in the same way they are protected against sexism or racism.

He said “accentism” was causing people to drop their regional accents, and that suppressing the speech sounds they had grown up with could damage their mental health.

Here in Norfolk, local accent and dialect specialist Professor Peter Trudgill carried out the first academic study into regional British speech patterns almost 50 years ago and is still a passionate advocate of regional accents.

He believes people should be as proud of their local accents as they are of local landscape, history and architecture.

“If you live in Norfolk and are pleased about that, then you should expect your children to sound like they grew up in Norfolk, and be pleased about that too,” said Prof Trudgill. “If you want them to grow up sounding like they come from London, you should move to London.”

His father grew up in Norwich and



■ Allan Smethurst, the Singing Postman, whose Norfolk accent gained him fame across the country. Left, dialect specialist Prof Peter Trudgill.

Pictures: EDP LIBRARY/BILL SMITH



The psychology of accents

Norwich psychologist Simon Hammond (pictured) of the University of East Anglia, said discrimination on grounds of someone's accent was linked to many social judgements about class and education.

Proud of his own South Yorkshire accent, he said: “It gives me a unique selling point when I'm outside the area and repertoire of socially shared ideas about what it is like to be from the area.

“From this I can begin to



strike a rapport with somebody.”

Although he has not changed his accent, he does make an effort to speak clearly. “If people cannot understand me, that is an issue

which impacts on my ability to do my job.”

However, he is a big fan of local accents. “I love my accent,

but being from Yorkshire I must say that otherwise I wouldn't be allowed home.

“But in all seriousness, I think local colloquialisms and regional accents enrich the variety of everyday life. Having been in Norfolk for the past six years or so, I'm still not quite sure that me and my neighbours fully understand each other, however my wife is from Hertfordshire and speaks much better Queen's English than I do, so often acts as interpreter.”

“That modification came at a cost. Dad knew that some people in business circles would look down on him if he spoke in the way that came most naturally to a young man from a terraced house in New Catton, and that opportunities might be denied to him.

“So throughout his adult life, on important and formal occasions, he suffered the anxiety that goes with having to think, not only about what you're saying, but about how you're pronouncing it.”

Prof Trudgill was studying modern languages at Cambridge when he realised he could apply simi-

lar academic methods to studying his own language. In 1968 he began recruiting Norwich people to take part in research into the local accent and dialect. It was the start of a career which led to him studying accents and dialects across the world.

Today he is president of Fond, the Friends of Norfolk Dialect, and writes a weekly column for the EDP, celebrating the way people speak in Norfolk.

“No one should have to feel, because of the bigotry of others, that they can make progress in life only if they abandon their native dialect,” he said. “People are at their most relaxed and articulate and expressive when they're speaking in their own natural accent.”

Dr Baratta's research reveals people are still modifying their accents, particularly in the workplace. It is the first research into how changing an accent affects a person's self-image and he said: “Many participants see accent modification as synonymous with selling out and a clear threat to their sense of self.”

■ For Steve Downes's take on the accent debate, turn to page 37.

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■ Don't miss Peter Trudgill's latest column in the EDP on Monday.